

Live NH/Play NH

## Granite State Wheelers



Bicyclists enjoy a ride along the coast.

PHOTO PROVIDED
BY GRANITE STATE

# Turning over the pedals for 50 years

**By Robert Levey** Special to the Union Leader

NOWN AS "New England's most active adult recreational bicycling club" with 400-plus members, Granite State Wheelers is celebrating its 50th anniversary, an occasion co-founder and president Dave Topham did not imagine in July 1971.

"With a skilled bike mechanic, an outgoing 'social leader,' a secretary/newsletter editor, and a couple 'computer geeks,' the club was formed," he said. "I joined thinking the club would be a fun thing,' which it is, but little did I think I would be on the Board pushing paperwork for the next 49 years."

After its formation, GSW grew rapidly in the 1970s. During this time, he said "many friendships

were formed and quite a few marriages resulted."

"Some of the children from those marriages are now cycling with the club," he said. "By the 1980s, a desire to have more club rides prompted local 'after work' gatherings usually with some social time over a pizza or beer."

#### Rides and events

Before long, GSW had rides scheduled for every day of the week except Fridays, which led to the club's moniker as "the most active recreational cycling club in New England." GSW's purpose, however, is not on competition or speed goals.

"The club was formed for adult recreational cyclists who wished to ride in groups of comparable skills, to explore areas of New Hampshire not commonly seen by car, and to provide social opportunities," he said.

Most rides are conducted on paved public roads, although Topham said rail trails have become popular in recent years. GSW rides vary from 10 to 100-plus miles in a day.

"The majority of GSW rides and events are held in the southeast region of New Hampshire for the convenience of and support by members," he said. "Weekend events could be anywhere in the state, so they draw cyclists from distant clubs and states."

Before the pandemic, GSW also offered numerous weekend getaways, including cross-country skiing in February and cycling in May, June, July, August and September.

"When COVID hit in 2020, all social activities were canceled while small groups still cycled," he said.

With the pandemic "almost under control," Topham said GSW is seeing an uptick in memberships, which feature discounts on parts and accessories at many local bike shops, a bi-monthly e-newsletter and more.

"(Members) also receive detailed ride listings with descriptions and leader contact information, mileage tracking and safety training sessions," he said. "Other benefits include access to our library of over 200 routes for viewing and use on GPS-enabled devices along with supplemental personal accident insurance when on club rides."

#### **Seacoast Century 2021**

A big part of membership includes participation in the club's annual Seacoast Century event, which Topham began in 1973. The highlight

at that time was a 100-mile route that covered 16 miles of New Hampshire's Seacoast with loops in Maine and Massachusetts. Originally just a club ride, he said so many cyclists heard about the event that the club made it their only paid event and opened it to the public with shorter routes of 25, 50 and 65 miles.

"All are completed within 10 hours on one day, each starting and ending at the Hampton Beach State Park," he said.

This year, the event is limited to 900 riders and only on one day, Sept. 25, as the state's COVID restrictions were in place when the permit was issued. Registrations sold out by May 10.

"In prior years and offering the same routes on both

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PHOTO PROVIDED BY GRANITE STATE WHEELMEN

Riders head out during the Granite State Wheelmen's annual Bikes & Beers NH event.

### Wheelers

weekend days, we have had up to 1,600 cyclists from around the whole country," he said.

The event is the club's only fundraiser, and Topham said GSW accumulated enough profit to award \$25,000 in grants to 10 New Hampshire bikeped organizations in 2020.

"That was our third grant program funded by Seacoast Century profits," he added.

#### **Changes and trends**

In looking to the future, he said he cannot help but reflect on the past and its connection to the present.

"We still have active members who joined

in our first decade but not cycling so fast or far," noted Topham, who said the club recently changed its name. "The original name, Granite State Wheelmen, was changed to 'Wheelers' in 2019 to be more modern and politically correct."

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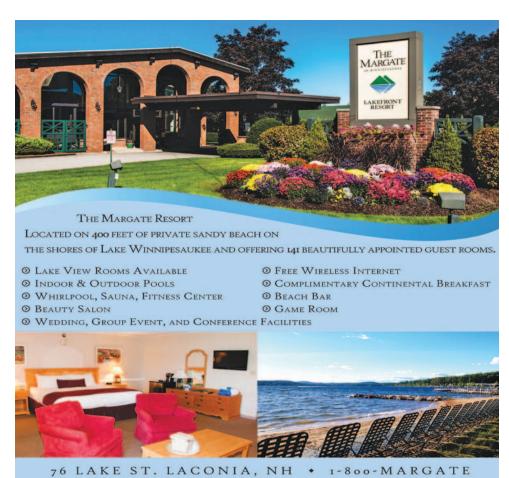
He added that they do not ride the old "high wheel ordinary" bikes and noted women "are definitely welcome" as they make up approximately 50% of membership.

Regarding emerging trends, he cited the use of e-bikes, which is a development supported by GSW members.

"Using an e-bike is not cheating, but rather they allow members to enjoy the company of others, the fresh air, and get some exercise versus sitting on a couch," he said.

In addition to member events, GSW hosts a public "MeetUp" website that shares information about rides and activities. GSW also works closely with the Bike-Walk Alliance of NH and the New Hampshire Rail Trails Coalition.

To learn more about GSW, including its 50th Anniversary Celebration at Elm Brook Park in Hopkinton on Sunday, Aug. 8, visit gswheelers. org.



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